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Wofford College

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The Liberal
Arts College
Under Fire



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The Liberal Arts College Under Fire

Perhaps alumni meetings, by their very nature being mutual admiration societies, are the most appropriate places for speakers to reminisce nostalgically, point with pride, and exude those unctuous phrases which Dunc Wallace used to label "intellectual pabulum." Now I am not old enough to be nostalgic, prefer to view with alarm rather than to point with pride, and think it might be appropriate for a member of the college community to lecture on serious topics rather than to try to inspire. And while tonight we have heard much about affection for Wofford College, I am concerned with the disaffection and hence want to discuss *The Liberal Arts College Under Fire*.

I consider this as an explanation, not a jeremiad. I welcome the chance to talk to Wofford citizens "from out in the provinces" for they often become dissident, disillusioned, and discontented with their alma mater simply because they have not properly pondered some of the questions at the very heart of liberal education. I would like to consider some of the questions that are below the surface — and go beyond such earth-shaking questions as whether eighteen semester hours of education is, or is not, enough for a teacher's certificate; whether students have adequate parking facilities for their cars; whether Coach Snidow has found a new left tackle; or even whether St. James by the Esso Station is contributing adequately to the Methodist Higher Education Fund.

By their very nature, colleges are controversial institutions. Some of our controversies can be avoided; others cannot; and some, frankly, should not. College presidents must spend a good portion of their time defending their institutions, appeasing their critics, and endlessly trying to keep some of the people happy some of the time.

In this, I am not concerned with our intramural controversies, for few real catastrophes are threatened by our internal friction. Such arguments are found in any family. Basically, most of us here on this campus are a community in general agreement about the

Foreword

Professor Jones's address at the Alumni-Senior Banquet on June 1, 1963 stirred his audience greatly. It was generally agreed that it should be published. I have, accordingly, requested the Alumni Office to send, with Professor Jones's consent, copies of this thought-provoking address to alumni and friends of the College. Additional copies are available on request.

CHARLES F. MARSH
President
Wofford College

basic nature, purpose, and goals of this institution. Our wrangles are over tactics, not goals. So long as we are dedicated to the same general purpose, we are not a grievously sick college within. Indeed, that we care enough to get excited about some of our community problems is itself a healthy sign. Faculty committees or the whole Wofford faculty will spend hours considering what would appear to a business man to be a very minute problem, which, if discussed that lengthily in the business world, would lead straight to bankruptcy. And yet these talkathons are a good sign that some long-winded professors are determined to do their conscientious best that the action taken be in accord with the purpose of the college, or in the best interests of a single boy who may be the topic under consideration. Tempers rise and blood almost flows in these sessions, but almost invariably in this type of controversy there is agreement that the decision must be in harmony with the basic principles of liberal arts education. These are not our serious controversies.

Colleges of all sorts also have controversies centering around student restlessness. These, too, we shall always have — as any student of college history can testify. Standards of conduct in any residential community — whether it be a college, an orphanage, an army barracks, a Y.W.C.A., or a group on a conducted tour — will not permit as much "social freedom" as most boys and girls enjoyed in high school days. Whether students like it or not, parents still hold the college responsible for certain standards of personal and moral behavior; they insist that the college act *in loco parentis*. Unhappily, they sometimes expect the college to act more successfully in that role than they ever did themselves. Colleges can never succeed in this thankless task, nor be able to give it up, until such time as enough parents have, in their own place and at the proper time, prepared and conditioned their sons for the mature responsibility that is the greater part of freedom. We still hear much from students about their freedom, but precious little about their responsibility. Meanwhile, the college is lambasted by those who think it should be a reform school to undo the shortcomings of the larger society of which it is

a part. Much of this criticism centers around the genuine problem of drinking that plagues most colleges: But how many students in the class of 1938 came from homes where drinking was accepted, in comparison to the number of the class of 1967 who will come from such homes? And don't all studies, including some made in South Carolina, show that the problem begins in the high school, and sometimes even in junior high? And so to certain preachers and other constant critics, don't expect us to undo what began under earlier home, church, and school influences. We can, and do, try. But you may rest assured that it means the college will be controversial if it has difficulty trying to maintain its own standards which are contrary to the tide now running in twentieth century society — in this problem and many others.

Church colleges have their own special brand of controversies just because they want to be labeled Christian. But too many of our critics have not given serious thought to the purpose of such institutions. These critics often want to judge the Christianity of a college by surface symptoms: Does it open each class with prayer? Does it require church attendance on Sunday? Does it permit dancing? How does Religion 51 handle the story of Jonah and the Whale? Such criteria as these do not indicate whether a college is Christian or not. How many ministers are on the Board of Trustees is beside the point. How many D.D. degrees it gives is no indication of the college commitment to the Christian way of life. As Albury Castell, a philosopher of the University of Oregon puts it, "A Christian college is an institution of learning where the decision-making from the trustees on through . . . the faculty takes place within a framework of Christian values. A Christian college is where the Christian religion is acted out . . ."

This sometimes means the college has to take a stand — and doing so will not always be popular in a world as far from Christian as ours is. But such a college does not have to apologize for insisting on social conduct different from that sanctioned by other institutions, such as the country club; does not have to apologize for hoping that its graduates turn out to be Christian gentlemen first,

and powerful tycoons second. The Christian college cannot put up with just anything. It has to stand for something. But when we do, it inevitably means bestirring the wrath of some students, parents, alumni, and fair-weather friends. But that is one of the problems of the Christian college. And it is one of the reasons colleges have controversies.

Also, colleges that want to be good become targets in controversies simply by showing concern for their own standards and prestige. One sometimes wonders whether a college can enjoy self-respect and still keep many friends. For example, in recent months a powerful and wealthy South Carolinian with a son whom we may charitably label "inadequate" offered Wofford College the tantalizing suggestion of substantial and continuing contributions to the endowment if his son were admitted to this college. Well, some might ask: What difference would one more addition to the academic probation list make? Or wouldn't this contribution help to educate some other gifted, but poor, boy? It would have. But the college lost a freshman, lost some money, gained another enemy — but it saved its integrity. Colleges are subjected to such selfish pressures day in and day out — and not just from the wealthy — and thereby they earn more than their share of selfish and disgruntled enemies who thereafter do untold but usually subtle harm. The kindest thing that can be said about these disgruntled little people is that perhaps they don't undersand colleges, and the fact that self-respect and integrity are as indispensable to colleges as they are to decent individuals.

Colleges encounter controversy and pressure when some poor soul has the misfortune to fail in college. But many of the unlettered in society show more wisdom than some who move in the so-called best circles, because the unlettered often share the opinion that education that is easily acquired is as disreputable as the woman of easy virtue. It may be heretical to say so, but one reason for respecting genuine learning is the fact that it is extremely difficult to acquire. The colleges that thrive are the hardest — simply because they have earned respect. As Gerald W. Johnson once put it, "Many a mind has acquired the basis of wisdom by being thrown out of college . . . ; for he who has learned to

take the word of wiser men is far indeed from being a fool." But often the colleges that want to be good earn enemies simply by doing this duty to themselves and to society.

Many of these campus controversies above, by good public relations, can be minimized, averted, or swept under the rug. But some we cannot and should not, for they are inherent in the very purpose of a small college dedicated to liberal education, and hence we need to note that purpose — that reason for its existence.

Such a college is not just for a special kind of curriculum. Rather, it must fill a special purpose not served by other institutions. There are all kinds of schools devoted to educating people: the business college, the school of nursing, the barbers' college, the finishing school, the seminary, the technological institute, and so on.

And there are other groups, not schools, which claim to be educating people. Presumably the John Birch Society would claim that it is educating people in Americanism, although any student of American history would doubt it and would view that Society itself as peculiarly unAmerican. The Americans for Democratic Action, an ultra-liberal group, would also say that it is educating people. The Spartanburg Development Association, which seeks to persuade people of particular political and economic viewpoints, would say it is an educational institution. The Committee on Political Education of the AFL-CIO would say the same thing. The American Medical Association has certainly lost no opportunity to try to educate the people in its political and economic philosophy in recent years, nor has the National Educational Association. Now all of these are unique, and because of their uniqueness, seem justified to their backers and deserving of their support.

But what is unique about a liberal arts college? And how do its problems and controversies stem from its uniqueness of purpose?

It seems to me that a college like Wofford has two main purposes:

FIRST, to transmit to each new generation the accumulation of knowledge, beliefs, and mores of the centuries — the accepted judg-

ments and values of our civilization and society. In that respect, it is a conservative force.

SECOND, it has a contradictory duty of constantly examining and re-evaluating that heritage, renovating parts of it yet usable, and through unshackled search and research seeking to add something to this heritage during each generation. In that respect, it is a liberal or progressive force.

Hence, a good college, like Janus, must always be looking both forward and backward. We cannot and should not turn our backs on the past. But we also should not walk backwards into the future. As a result, we will always be alienating both the doctrinaire conservatives and the doctrinaire liberals.

In our society, there are those who choose to oppose the present, to buck the tides, and to look longingly to what they label the Good Old Days — which were probably never that good anyhow. When the college looks forward, these people scream in anguish and alarm.

Also, in our society are those who deplore the past, scorn tradition, and are determined to overhaul the world from the ground up. When the college is concerned with the heritage of our civilization, they scream in anguish and alarm. When a worthwhile tradition is respected, they lament loudly, overlooking one of Dr. Henry Nelson Snyder's wise observations that "When an institution begins to forget its past, the time will come when it will not have a past worth remembering."

Political extremists in history have been aware of the role of education. Those leaders who want to create an alleged utopia, or to change a nation overnight, seek to control colleges because they see education as the guardian of the roots of the past, which they consider an impediment to the revolutionary changes and purposes which they have. Thus, the greatest anti-Communist of them all, Adolf Hitler, took over education; thus the latest and noisiest Communist of them all, Fidel Castro, took over education. On the other hand, those reactionaries who want no change at all see education as an insidious evil force which stimulates discontent and

raises disturbing questions about the status quo. Hence such leaders as Philip II, Francisco Franco, and Rafael Leonidas Trujillo also took over education.

To survive, a college has to remain independent of both reactionary and revolutionary forces — or else cease to serve its function of linking the past with the future. It must carry along the heritage and traditions of the past, and thereby must serve society as its memory and conscience. Some ultra-liberals would have us drop this obligation, but if we did, society would lose part of its memory and would suffer from amnesia.

But on top of this heritage, the college must also be building anew, and must serve society as imagination serves the man. And here the other critics, the conservatives, would have us close our minds to changes and to new ideas, with the result that society would suffer from fear psychoses and would assume that the present, or the past, constitutes perfection in human aspirations — despite the obvious facts to the contrary.

If the college tries to satisfy either of these conflicting groups, it can do so only at the expense of its very soul — by defaulting on one of its two main purposes. Hence the liberal arts college that truly lives up to its purpose *should* alienate partisans with one-track minds. Perhaps so long as we are getting violent objections from both factions, we can take some consolation that our primary task is being at least partially done.

Many of the attitudes of college critics depend on their points of view. Alumni of the class of 1900 are sure that the ideal Wofford student body should number about 188; those of the class of 1935 would say 476; those of 1963, would say exactly 833. In the 1930's I complained lustily in the *Old Gold and Black* about mudholes in campus roads; now twenty-five years later I worry lest some rattle-brained sophomore overturn his sports car in a student parking lot. I complained that Archer Hall was not fit for pigs; now I fear lest some of the loudest complainers in the student body will not be able to keep up the style of living to which they have become accustomed in DuPre Hall. Some alumni thought it was sacrilege to renovate the Main

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should be easy to identify — whether his educational background be that of an Abraham Lincoln or the graduate of a great European university. To paraphrase Woodrow Wilson, a liberally educated man sees a little further than the next fellow, because he has learned to look through the eyes of wise men of past ages. He is not afraid to combine ideas and see where they lead. He is a little more tolerant than the average because he knows that the history of human efforts is not a glory road, but more often a road of defeats, of stalemates, of hard-won compromises. A liberal education means, then, all those things that unbind, that free, that liberate men from blindness, from prejudices, from exaggerated certainty, from narrowness. Robert Hutchins once stressed that its purpose was "not to teach men facts, theories, or laws. It is not to reform them, to amuse them, or to make them expert technicians. It is to unsettle their minds, widen their horizons, inflame their intellects, and teach them to think straight — and if possible — for themselves." Now that kind of education, I suggest is not nebulous; it is practical.

Perhaps the anti-intellectualism which has re-appeared in America stems from the popular impression of the educated man as some pompous walking encyclopedia who takes himself over-seriously because of his ability to spout meaningless gobbledegook. Now such stuffed shirts may impress other pseudo-intellectuals, but usually they leave the world little better than they found it. When intellect loses touch with the heart, imagination, moral sense, and spiritual intuition, it eventuates into an intellectualism that begets anti-intellectualism. (Extremism always begets an opposite extremism, as this country may yet learn.) But the truly educated man who is the product of liberal education should not be *that* kind of intellectual, and should be as welcome at the cracker barrel of a country store as on the quadrangle of a great university. It is the difference between knowledge and wisdom. As Senator William Fulbright reminded an audience at Tufts University in May, "The object of liberal education is wisdom . . . We have viewed higher education too little as the means of elevating the mind and spirit, and too much as the road to 'know-how' and 'success.' "

Men whose minds and spirits are elevated can never be content with their world, and hence will provoke controversies with those who prefer to think that we live in the best of all possible worlds. But the man whose spirit has been liberated by a liberal education will be a man with a sense of mission, with a deep annoying conscience about the ills of man, with the courage to try to correct them. If he comes from a Christian college, he should be concerned with whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, are just, are pure, are lovely, are of good report; for he will see virtue in those things and praise them. He is the product of a college that is concerned with the best of our traditions, but which is willing to have an open mind about changing the ills of our own day and to entertain some new thoughts.

But this college with its purpose of looking both backward and forward, of being both conservative and liberal, of being always a liberating force — does not deserve to survive unless it communicates these attitudes to its alumni. It is not enough for the faculty to be practicing this philosophy in ivory towers. Unless the alumni carry along something of that attitude, then colleges are but useless little islands isolated in society. If, however, the graduates continue to keep alive that campus attitude, keep open and alert minds by reading widely, by not being thoughtlessly brain-washed all too readily, by not becoming shackled to prejudices and impassioned partisanship of all sorts, then the liberal arts college will still have a place in our society. More important, its role will be contagious — and we suspect that society would be markedly improved thereby.

But I warn you that such colleges will not be completely popular — not even with those of their own alumni who have lost touch with the whole concept and function of liberal arts education. Such colleges and such graduates who would keep alive this double mission of the liberal arts college will themselves always be the subject of much controversy. But that is part of liberal education. And that is Wofford College. And I pose but one question: Would you really have it any other way?

Dr. Lewis P. Jones

A son of Mr. and Mrs. D. L. Jones of Laurens, S. C., Dr. Jones was graduated from Laurens High School and Darlington School



for Boys in Rome, Ga. He received the A. B. degree from Wofford in 1938 and the M. A. degree in 1940. After graduation from Wofford he taught school at Ford High School, Laurens, before entering the Navy in 1942. A lieutenant, he

served in the Atlantic, Pacific and Caribbean theaters and was discharged in 1946.

Dr. Jones has done graduate work at Duke University and the University of North Carolina and received the Ph. D. degree from the University of North Carolina in 1951 where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

A member of the Wofford College faculty since 1946, Dr. Jones now serves as professor of history and chairman of the department.